

SCHOOLS OF QUR'ANIC EXEGESIS: GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT. By Hussein Abdul-Raof. London and New York: Routledge, 2010. Culture and Civilization in the Middle East 18. HB. 274p. ISBN: 978-0-415-44957-1.

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University of Leeds Senior Lecturer in Arabic and Qur'anic studies Hussein Abdul-Raof's latest book, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis: Genesis and Development*, appears to be a compilation of lecture notes filled with inaccuracies and biases, beginning with what the author calls "the intrusive views of the compilers of early exegesis manuscripts" and "the skepticism among Western scholars about the authenticity of early Muslim works of exegesis and of prophetic tradition" (blurb and p. xvi). The book is divided into nine chapters—a preamble, "Exegesis and Hadith," "Politics of exegesis," "Dichotomy between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*," "Evolution of exegesis," "Formative schools of exegesis," "Linguistic and stylistic tools of exegesis," "Jurisprudential tools of exegesis," a conclusion, a bilingual glossary, and a two-page index in which one will not find the name of any scholar but will find "George W. Bush" and "Hafiz al-Asad."

Muslim scholars define *tafsīr* as a type of learning or science (*ilm*), but Abdul-Raof defines it as "a literary activity" (p. x) and of dubious value at that: "Classical and modern Qur'anic exegesis works have *not been taken on board by Muslim scholars as reliable* sources for the explication of the Qur'anic texts.... The majority of Muslim exegetes have let their imagination run wild" (p. xv, emphasis added). He scoffs at the 1,441-year-old nexus between text and exegesis, which he considers "mostly characterized by augmentations; interpolations; internal contradiction; intrusive comments ascribed to the original scholar; spurious [P]rophetic traditions; intrusive exegetical tools such as poetic loci falsely ascribed to pre-Islamic poets; and... theological cleavages echoing the exegete's own politico-religious dogma" (pp. 1-2) while "forged hadiths proliferated out of control across the Muslim world. The *isnād* that permeates Qur'anic exegesis has been, *justifiably*, engulfed by moderate to extreme scepticism on the part of Western Qur'an scholars for possible corruption related to a forged *isnād*" (p. 17, 138 emphasis added). There are just, you see, too many differing exegeses of the same thing, such as Q 112 (Sūrat al-Ikhlās), or Q 15:87, *We have certainly given you seven of the oft-repeated...*, or who the sacrificial son was in Q 37:101 and 107 (p. 15, 17, 21). So he finds that "the amount of details the companions have got through his [the Prophet's] exegesis is still unknown" (p. 115). But non-*isnād*-based exegesis, also, he considers "purely hypothetical" (p. 3-4). He gives no hint of the methods developed by the (actual) Qur'ān scholars to untangle purported cruxes (as illustrated for example in Husayn 'Alī al-Harbi's *Manhaj al-Imām al-Ṭabarī fīl-tarjīh*); in his view there is nothing reliable, and thus nothing reliably true in *tafsīr*.

Abdul-Raof blows out of proportion the incidence of forgeries in the hadith corpus by citing the false premises of Mohammad Hashim Kamali, a certain Ishaq Musa al-Husayni, Ahmad Amin, and Mahmud Abu Rayya (p. 16); his list of the "factors that shore up their scepticism" is even more symptomatic. He himself shows no knowledge of hadith sourcing (cf. p. 39, referring to 15th, 16th, and 20th-century works) or of the correct grading of famous narrations (p. 60, "The Muslim ruler is the shade of God on earth"); even less of canonical readings, as he seems unaware that in Q 5:6 both *wa-arjulakum* (the majority reading) and *wa-arjulikum* (the Shī'ī reading and al-Ṭabarī's choice) are equally mass-transmitted readings, and neither entails "objectionable *ta'wīl*" (p. 107). He translates *riwāyat al-ḥadīth 'alā al-wajh* as "transmission of hadith through personal contact" (p. 249) when in fact it means integral and literal transmission regardless of contact. He says things like "among the prominent scholars who narrate from 'Alī are Abū Hurayra and Sufyān b. 'Uyayna" (p. 118); attributes Jewish parentage to Ubayy b. Ka'b, a Najjārī Khazrajī (p. 119, 151—a blunder which Ahmad 'Alawna in his *Nazarāt fī Kitāb al-A'lām* lays squarely at the feet of Khayruddin al-Zirikli); calls Mujāhid b. Jabr "a non-native Arab" (p. 149) who "revised the Qur'ān three times under Ibn 'Abbās's supervision" (p. 129) when the narrations all say *thalāthīna 'arḍatan*; and purveys false claims about al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, his school, and Anas b. Mālik (p. 155-156). He harps on non-issues, such as the fact that the pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās's *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, *Masā'il Nāfi' b. al-Azraq*, and *al-Lughāt fīl-Qur'ān/Gharīb al-Qur'ān* are all forgeries (p. 14-22). When Muslim exegetes say "Ibn

‘Abbās’s *Tafsīr*” they mean sound narrations such as the *Ṣaḥīfat ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭalḥa ‘an Ibn ‘Abbās* which Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal recommended and from which al-Bukhārī narrated. He is so impressed with his secondary sources (“Rippin says”) that he overlooks—just as they do—that Ibn ‘Abbās was without contest the foremost linguistic expositor of the Qur’ān among the Companions regardless (see Khalid al-‘Azzani’s *Juhūd al-Ṣaḥāba fil-Lughā*); but he and they want to paint as incoherent a picture as he can of the sciences of Qur’an and Hadith: the profusion of codices, readings, meanings (bucking at the possibility of polysemy), claims on the circumstances of revelation and abrogated status of various verses, makes it all so confused that nothing can be said to mean anything for sure. Add the two clarion calls of Orientalist revisionism: the claim that there was no early writing of hadith or exegesis (cf. p. 112, 116, 126, 131, 136), rather, institutional objection to recording of any type (p. 152), and the claim that there was one forgery conspiracy after another, and you can see why to him (and the whole institution of Orientalism), it all necessarily remains a heap of contradictions.

Abdul-Raof describes Mu‘tazilis as “Sunnis” and Ash‘aris as “non-mainstream” (p. 9, 64-67, 71, 73, 153, 240); elsewhere he calls both schools “mainstream” (p. 68). The Māturīdī school gets no mention at all. He misrepresents Qadarism as the belief that “we are agents of our good and bad acts” (p. 69) when this is in fact the Sunni creed (the Qadari creed is that we create them as well). He attributes the “level between two levels” theological stance to Khārijism (p. 71). He confuses the traditionally redflagged *mutashābihāt* with the innocuous *mutashābih lughawī* (p. 111). He claims that Ibn al-‘Arabī and Ibn ‘Aṭīyya accuse Sufis of fanaticism and heresy (p. 63). He makes up a Mu‘tazili-leaning Ṭabarī (p. 70). He garbles the concepts of *tafsīr bil-ma‘thūr* (exegesis transmitted from authority) and *tafsīr bil-ra’y* (author-inferred exegesis) which he renders respectively as “traditional” and “purely hypothetical... *that is, non-mainstream*” (p. 3-4, emphasis added). He also renders the latter as “independent reasoning... hypothetical opinion, that is, personal reasoning” (p. 10), and elsewhere yet as “non-mainstream exegesis” (p. 247). Such simplistic labels fail to inform that *athar* and *ra’y* in exegesis are often inextricably connected and obscure the fact that the most copied, most taught, and most commented *tafsīr* of all time has been a *tafsīr bil-ra’y* by a foremost Ash‘arī—al-Bayḍāwī’s *Anwār al-Tanzīl*. His meandering way of acknowledging the pre-eminence of *ra’y* in Ibn ‘Abbās’s exegesis is to describe the latter as “*ijtihād*”—which he translates as “hypothetical opinion” (p. 148) as well—and to exaggerate that “we do not encounter much reference to hadith in the exegetical works of this [the Meccan] school” (p. 162). What he fails to show is that, as indicated by Ibn ‘Āshūr in his *Muqaddimāt, tafsīr bil-ra’y* also emerges from the exegeses of the rest of the Companions—Ibn Mas‘ūd, ‘Ā’isha, Ibn ‘Umar, Bādhām Mawlā Umm Hāni’, and other *ṣaḥīḥ* Companion *tafsīrs*. (One only needs to remember ‘Ā’isha’s famously independent interpretations of Q 6:103 denying that the Prophet had seen Allāh Most High during the Ascent and Q 35:22 denying that the dead of Badr had actually heard the Prophet’s address to them; or Ibn Mas‘ūd’s interpretation of al-Dukhān not as an eschatological event, but one that had already occurred.) In fact, vast troves of early exegesis are *ra’y*-based as shown by ‘Abd al-Salam al-Jarullāh in his book *Naqd al-Ṣaḥāba wal-Tābi ‘in lil-Tafsīr*. More: this approach began in the very presence of the Prophet—upon him blessings and peace—and with his approval according to al-Ṭaḥāwī in his *Tafsīr* for Q 2:187; he would even initiate it, as when he asked Ubayy what he thought the greatest verse in the Qur’ān was (Ubayy answered Q 3:2 and the Prophet approved).

Abdul-Raof makes too much of another false “dichotomy between *tafsīr* and *ta’wīl*” (pp. 85-110) which he translates respectively as “exegesis and interpretation.” He claims that exegesis “can only be achieved through conclusive evidence (*dalīl qat’ī*)” (p. 87, 105) while *ta’wīl* means “hypothetical,” “personal opinion,” “allegorical and esoteric signification” and is interchangeable with *ẓann*, *majāz*, *bāṭin*, and *ijtihād* (p. 14, 71, 86, 102, 105, 136, 148). Thus on the one hand he makes up a novel criterion of strictest narrative authenticity as a precondition for the existence of *tafsīr* and on the other he confuses *ta’wīl* with *ra’y* and stuffs both into the ragbag of speculation and figurative batinism. He claims that the earliest complete exegesis dates back to the second century (p. 25, 125)—“the process of recording and serious scholarship in exegesis have in fact begun during the phase of the post-successors” (p. 136) when in fact there are earlier ones as shown by Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī and al-‘Azzānī in their works; suffice it that Ibn Abī Mulayka said, “I witnessed Ibn ‘Abbās saying to a book-laden Mujāhid: *Uktub!* and they went through the entire Qur’ān together” as narrated

by al-Ṭabarī. He describes al-Thawrī's exegesis as "author-oriented" (p. 26) when it is mostly transmission-oriented. He characterizes both the Prophet's and the Andalusian exegeses as devoid of Israelite reports (p. 116, 143) when the exegeses of Makkī, al-Qurṭubī, Abū Ḥayyān, and Ibn 'Aṭīyya have their fair share of them as do, to a lesser extent, the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* and *Sunan*.

He misrepresents Ibn 'Abbās as explicating the Divine Attributes exclusively in non-modal fashion (*bi-lā kayf*) when his figurative glosses of the *'arsh* as Divine Knowledge and the *sāq* as hardship are well-known; and his exegesis as "highly influenced by the People of the Book's views" (p. 118, 149), a Goldziherian myth put to rest by Ibn 'Abbās's own excoriation, in al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, of Judeo-Christian Scriptures as the soul of unreliability. From the same mould is the "impact of other faiths and spiritual practices on Sufi *tafsīr* (which?) such as Christianity, Buddhism and Persian neoplatonic philosophy" (p. 144). The book is further blighted by an avalanche of disjointed numbered paragraphs (up to 56 unintegrated such paragraphs p. 63-83); mistranslations (*madhhab* = "sect" p. 7; "*ẓulm* literally means aggression" p. 114; *al-ṭahūru mā'uhu* = "that whose water is clean" p. 115; *gharīb* = "hidden meanings" p. 245; and he thinks Ibn al-Qayyim's *Aqsām al-Qur'ān*, a book on oaths [*qasam*] "deals with the major parts [*qism*] of the Qur'ān" p. 140); mistransliterations/misspellings ad nauseam (Abū al-Shaykh Ibn Ḥayyān as Ibn Habbān; Jubba'ī as Jibā'ī; 'Adī b. Ḥātim as 'Udayy; Ibn Wabīb and Wabīb b. Munabbih as Wahab; 'Ikrima as 'Ikrama; Ibn Juzayy as Ibn al-Juzzi; Hudhayl as Hadhīl; Jumāhī as Jamhī; Qinnawjī as Qinnūjī; *murajjih* as *murajjah*; *fahm* as *fiḥm*; *uslūb* as *islūb*; "Labanese"; etc.); countless typos, no italics for any of the Arabic terms, and lack of primary sourcing for pages on end.

Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis does not present any systematic and integrated documentation of what those schools were and of their unique contributions to the genre, most conspicuously the pre-modern schools and contemporary *tafsīrs* which get perfunctory treatment (p. 97, 145-146). It consistently gets key exegetical categories wrong and imports alien ones ("haggadic," "halakhic," "masoretic" p. 101, and "exegesis by non-Muslims" p. 145). Although it reads at times like a who's who of Western authors (who are almost invariably irrelevant, off the mark, or obsolete), it is unreadable even as Orientalism; as for the conscionable reader time is too precious to be spent on a book written by someone who equates *tafsīrs* with fiction.

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